

James (Part 13) – Wanderer / Restorer

Matt Chandler – May 31, 2015

If you have your Bibles, why don't you grab those? James 5 is where we're going to camp out in our time together today. If you don't have a Bible, there should be a hardback, black covered one somewhere around you. If you don't own one, that's our gift to you outright. It's hard to believe that this is our thirteenth week in James and the last week we'll be in James. We started this series in February. Here we are landing the plane today.

I said from the beginning that the book of James was about progress and not perfection, and that's a good thing because regardless of how long we live, the book of James is going to reveal every time you read it that God is still actively at work in you because you will not be where it's asking you to be. That's why I'm saying it's about progress, not perfection.

We started right out of the gate, week one, and we talked about the reality that God has called us to be servants rather than demand that other people serve us. Is anybody still struggling with that one just a little, just a tiny, little bit? You find yourself still wanting, still feeling entitled, still feeling like people owe you service rather than just feeling totally freed up to serve them at all costs. Anybody this week? How about today already? Okay, so you can see.

What happens? I want to explain to you why I think that's good and not bad. As we read the book of James and really as we read our Bibles, what begins to happen is my being able to see that I'm still struggling in this area and have not fully surrendered to God in this area is an objective evidence that God is still at work in me, that he is maturing, he is growing, he is chiseling, he is conforming me into the image of his Son.

Really throughout the book of James, over and over and over again, we see the call to progress, not perfection, and that God is at work in our day of arriving, not positionally perfect, because we're that in Christ, but rather conformed into the image of his Son is a work that continues every day for

the rest of our lives. If God in his mercy (if it is mercy) gives you 120 years (that might be a curse, right?), he will still be at work in your heart.

I love that we don't get to arrive. I love that he's just constantly working on me, and the promise of grace is that he never grows weary of how slowly I seem to develop. I don't know how you see yourself. I feel like a slow developer. I feel like I still struggle with things I shouldn't struggle with anymore, yet it remains.

If we had an opportunity to go through the entire series... Of course, we don't have that kind of time, but I'm going to give it a go here. If we just started walking through the weeks, we could see failed, failed, failed, failed throughout. After we talked about living as servants rather than demanding to be served, we talked about considering trials joy.

We talked about being not just hearers of the Word but doers of the Word. We talked about not being judgmental but rather extending mercy, walking in works that reveal faith, watching our mouths, walking in true wisdom rather than false wisdom, pursuing godliness not worldliness, walking in humility, seeing money rightly, and about the importance of patience.

Every week in the book of James as I've studied, as I've prepared to preach it, the Holy Spirit has also pricked my heart that I'm not where the Lord would have me, gave me an opportunity to lean into his grace and mercy, to ask for the power of the Holy Spirit in my life, and to get back up and keep walking, knowing that he who began the good work in me will be faithful to carry it on into completion. Now, the Lord is not done with me yet. He's actively at work in my heart.

Last week, as James starts to finish out his letter to these believers, he begins to really lay before him the components they're going to need to continue this pursuit of progress and trust Christ for perfection. Last week, we talked about the empowering work of the Holy Spirit that enables us to pray and praise. Those are gifts of God and the Holy Spirit, birthed as he has anchored us to Christ in relationship. This isn't a list of facts about God but a relationship we're in with our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ the Son. We pray. We praise.

On top of that, the Holy Spirit has given us the rich, right gift of the ongoing ethic of confession and repentance. See, how all of this starts to piece together is the Word of God bears its weight on us. It shows us that we're not quite where the Lord would have us. Conviction should always be sweet for

the believer. Conviction should always be sweet for the believer in Christ because it's an invitation to surrender ourselves over to what God is doing in our hearts.

Then from there, the Holy Spirit empowers us to confess and repent that we do fall short. The gospel frees us up to be wrong all the time. It's awesome. Then own what we can own, confess, and repent. You will never stop confessing and repenting, correct? You're just not going to get there. Listen. If you did get to where you no longer needed to confess and repent, would that be a good thing? Would that not be a marker that God's work in you is completely done?

If that's the case, then what are we doing? Take me to glory. If we're done, we're done. When I got sick, and when I travel and Lauren does that, "Hey, be careful," and I'm on a plane... I don't even know what it looks like to be careful on a plane. When we go into places that might be somewhat dangerous globally, I've just always carried with that, "My day is my day, and if the Lord is done, I'd rather go on and get it. If he's not done, then let's play, but if he's done, then let me just head on home."

Last week, we just talked about these kind of internal anchoring points, prayer and praise and the ongoing ethics of confession and repentance. God, knowing our fragility, knowing how fragile we are... Even the great theologian Sting had a whole song about our fragility, how fragile, how easy we are to break. God gave us not just internal power but external protection.

With that said, let's look here at the last two verses of I believe this amazing epistle. James 5, starting in verse 19. I've tried something new in preaching throughout this series, which is just to kind of give you a sentence before I read the text so you can see where I'm going. Here's my sentence based on what I'm about to read. We all wander. That wandering is dangerous. Therefore, we all woo, and there is much to rejoice in as we are used by God to woo others.

James 5, starting in verse 19. **"My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."** This is right out of the gate. We all wander. We all do. There is no one in this room, no one has ever touched this stage, no one has ever followed Christ who does not wander.

Now, James' use of the word *wander* could lead one to believe that he's talking about inadvertent, "Oh, I was heading this way, and I accidentally went this way." It was an inadvertent drift away

from what is true. That's not how this word is used throughout the New Testament. See, this word refers to any deviation from the truth of faith, whether inadvertent or intentional, minor or major. This word *wandering* means to disbelieve or wander away.

Some other texts it's used in where it can't be mistaken as a kind of inadvertent drift but a legitimate, "I don't care. I'm going to do whatever I want." It says in 2 Timothy 3:12-13, "**Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...**" Verse 13 is where I want us to spend just a second. "**...while evil people and impostors will go...**" That "will go" is the same word we see in our text, James 5, today. "**...will go [wander] on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.**"

I think an even more explicit text is 2 Peter 2:15. Here's what it says. "**Forsaking the right way** [the way of faith, the way of the Word of God], **they have gone astray** [wandered]. **They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing...**" Did you hear it? This wandering we see in 2 Peter is not an inadvertent wandering but a love of gain from wrongdoing. They delight in wrongdoing.

Wandering isn't just inadvertent drift but at times, glad-hearted giving over to sinfulness is our lives. It is a decision, a walking in, "I love my sin more than I love the things of God." What we see in the book of James is that wandering can be one of two things. Wandering is genuine believers in Christ who drift. Have you been there? I've been there.

How many of you have followed the Lord for longer than 20 years now? Okay, keep your hands up. How many of you with your hands up right now still continue to drift every now and then? How about drift constantly? Notice that no one's hand has gone down yet. As believers... In fact, does not one of our most famous historic Christian songs have in it this idea of wandering? "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart, Lord. Take and seal it."

Right? We're even singing about how prone we are to wander. We can see in the book of James that sometimes wandering is inadvertent, but we also know from the book of James that sometimes, there are those who are wandering. This is why it's so serious to pay attention to wandering. There are those wandering, and that wandering is objective evidence that they've never been a Christian at all.

They might look like church folk and talk like church folk, but when all is said and done, they do not love the Lord. They are not believers in Christ. If you're like, "Well, I just don't know that's for you to pronounce judgment on," I would totally agree, but I can tell you this. About seven years ago, at the Highland Village Campus, a man came up to be afterward just asking questions. I'm always happy to answer questions, so we spent some time talking there.

In the conversation, I started wondering whether or not he had ever believed in Christ as something other than a historic figure. It sounded like we were talking about Abraham Lincoln. Are you tracking with that? It didn't sound like we were talking about the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. It sounded like we were talking about Lincoln. I just asked him, "When did you become a Christian?" His response was, "I was born in San Antonio."

I love San Antonio. The River Walk is amazing. As far as Texas goes, it's a nice spot, but let me just be real honest. Even if you have, "Texan by the grace of God," on the back of your truck, being born in this state does not make you a Christian. Having Christian parents does not make you a Christian. Having someone dunk you underwater when you're a kid does not make you a Christian.

You being a good person does not make you a Christian. You adhering to some sort of conservative moral code does not make you a Christian. James's fear throughout this book is that the church would be filled with those who believed they were Christians and were not. When he begins to say there are wanderers, one of the reasons that is so serious is some of these wanderers are not Christians, and they think they are.

We are to lovingly try to woo them back. Then he moves into what I believe is such a profound and gracious way to consider how to engage wandering that is dangerous for the soul. He goes on to say here that if you win your brother back, if you woo him back, that covers a multitude of sin. Here's what's happening in that place. Let me read Proverbs 10:12 to you. **"Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses."**

This, "Love covers a multitude of sins," becomes a refrain throughout the New Testament. It almost appears as though it was some sort of creedal component in how the church considered how they were to function with one another. Here's what I've learned in 20 years of pastoral ministry. Several weeks ago, Lauren and I dropped our kids off with my parents, and Lauren and I just went down into the city and got a hotel down there and ate some good food.

We just had a good time, just she and I, just making sure we were connected well. It was a good little break for us just to get away together for a night. We don't have a television in our bedroom. If you do, I'm not judging you. I'm just saying we don't do that. We were lying in bed. I turned on the television and was scrolling through the channels. I came across this show called *Dog Whisperer*.

Have you seen this? I feel like I'm totally late to the game on this show. I was fascinated. I even came home the next day and tried some with our dog. My dog was like, "Get off me," as he continued to just be completely disobedient to all I said. One of the things that was happening is he was trying to save this dog that was super aggressive and would bite. The owner of the dog would get rough with the dog to try to get the dog to stop its bad behavior.

One of the ways Cesar kind of coached... "Cesar," like I know him. One of the ways the Dog Whisperer handled this is he said, "There's a certain type of breed that once they're elevated, if you elevate, they'll elevate further, and they can't stop elevating until you stop elevating." He told the man, "Calm down. Stop yanking the leash. Stop doing these things. You need to calm down."

The reality of sin is, when we give ourselves over to sin, the heart hardens. As the heart hardens, our reactions, attitudes, and the way we behave grows increasingly dark, angry, and aggressive. Here we see, "No, no. Love covers a multitude of sin. Love de-escalates. Love woos home." We see in 1 Peter 4 this same thing. **"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly ..."**

I say this all the time. I'm so grateful that the Bible never sugar coats anything. You just see that for us to love one another is going to require some earnestness. It's going to require some effort. It's going to require... Have you ever started running when you're out of shape and get that stitch in your side, whatever that is? It's like God going, "Stop or you're going to die." That thing. It's going to require earnestness. You're going to have to push through to love one another.

Why should we earnestly seek to love one another? Well, the text says, **"...since love covers a multitude of sins."** The way to win a brother back, the way to woo is to love. I think this is the place where that external protection kicks in. So Love. That is kind of this ethereal, "Love." What does that actually mean, to woo in love a wanderer in our midst?

If we're going to talk about how we woo, I think the Bible has given us Matthew 18 as an example of how to carefully, compassionately, and mercifully woo wanderers, whether that wanderer be inadvertent or whether that wanderer be glad-hearted, "I'm going to do whatever I want. I don't

care what the Bible says," and maybe revealing that they're no believer at all. I want us to look at Matthew 18.

I want you to notice a couple of things about the process of Matthew 18. It's slow, it's careful, and it's compassionate. I want to show you those things in the text. Let's start there. I'm just going to put it on the screen. **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."** Do you see the end goal?

The end goal is not to be right. The end goal is not power. The end goal is nothing but to win our brother back. We already saw in this text that this is a very serious situation because someone might not be a Christian. Someone might be wandering to the destruction of their own soul. Our hope is to win our brother or sister back, so we engage.

I want you to notice how the engagement occurs. It happens within a relationship that is already present. It happens in private. It happens gently. He shows up and says, "Hey, I think... Look here. It appears that you're walking in sin. Brother or sister, I'm afraid you're drifting here. I don't know if it's inadvertent drift. I don't know if it's a glad-hearted drift. I'm seeing it. I just want to bring it to your attention. I think there's some drift there."

Let's say you sit down and say, "Hey, I'm concerned. I feel like there is some drift in your life. I love you. You know I love you. I'm just nervous for you." They go, "You know, I appreciate that. I love that text. While you were talking, I thought of the text Jesus taught in Matthew 7 about the guy with the giant log in his face that was trying to get the speck out of another guy's eye, and I felt like in this conversation, you're log face and I'm speck. I appreciate that, but why don't you go read your Bible and get the log out of your face? Then let's worry about this little thing right here."

What if it elevates, right? Now it's elevated. What do you do next? I think what happens next is where a lot of mistakes are made, and I'll get to our mistakes shortly because there are many. Look at what happens next. **"But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses."** The second part of the process is slow, but I want you to see what just happened.

We came and said, "Hey, I'm concerned that you may be wandering. I'm just nervous about your soul. I want to lay this before you." The response (and this is just the process we see in Matthew 18) is, "Hey, log face, no way." What do we do? Well, maybe we're not seeing things well. Maybe we're

missing some information. Maybe our pride has gotten involved. Maybe this is conflict and not a discipline issue at all.

What do you do? You don't go build a coalition to pile on. You go say, "Hey, we're in some conflict here. We're not seeing some things. Can you guys come help? I'm really worried about this person's soul. Can you come and help us kind of get to the bottom about what is actually going on here?" We enter in again, this time with those who can establish the evidence.

Is this really a sin issue, or is it something else? Is this really wandering, or is it something else? Are we missing pieces of information? Is this conflict that requires godly mediation, not discipline? Then let's say that happens. Two or three others show up, and then evidence is established. At this point, the person goes, "I know that's what the Word of God says. I know this is sin. I don't care. I'm going to do what I want. I'm doing what I want."

At that point, it rolls again. Look what happens next. **"If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."** Now, I think when people talk about church discipline, most often, they have an archaic view of what it actually is.

The reason church discipline is so sober and requires so much care is because what happens in the final stage is a church removes affirmation from the person as a believer. It doesn't mean we say, "You are not a believer in Christ," because only God can judge that, correct? I mean, what do men know about the salvation that exists in the heart of another person? Nothing, other than the Bible has called us and Jesus has taught that by our fruit, you will recognize us.

What happens in the final stage of discipline is the church simply says, "We are no longer able to affirm that you are a believer in Christ, and we cannot affirm that you are a believer in Christ because you have said with your mouth, 'I don't care what the Bible says. I don't care what Jesus says. I don't care what the church has historically believed. I'm going to do what I want, and I don't care what the consequences are.'"

At that moment, a church just removes affirmation in the hopes that that removal of affirmation won't shame the person but might jar the person into seeing how serious the stakes are in this game, which goes back to James 5.

Now, several months ago, the elders were approached by a couple of our members, graciously and lovingly approached, with concerns about how we were operating in our discipline processes. We heard those members and began to internally dig into our practices. Namely, we wanted to look at whether or not we were failing or fulfilling our covenant promises to you as members.

Here's what the covenant says. "The elders of the church promise to lovingly exercise discipline when necessary for the glory of God, the good of the one disciplined, and the health of the church as a whole." There were two questions we wanted to get to the bottom of. Here are the two questions. Are the elders of The Village Church, when we practice discipline, doing it lovingly? The second question is are we doing it when it's necessary or are we too quick to move there? Those are the two questions we set out to ask.

We began to look, and we began to dig around. To me, it is nothing but the providence of God that here on... I wrote the James series a year ago, and here we are on this weekend, landing in this text. After digging around internally, the elders of The Village Church have come to believe that we have failed to fulfill our covenant promises to you as members to lovingly exercise church discipline when necessary.

If you are a covenant member of The Village Church, I'm asking you on behalf of the elders, will you forgive us? There are some of you who are not just members, but you've borne the brunt of our lack of love, care, compassion, mercy. Those are acts that are built into the role of elder. We've failed to walk in that with you, and you have borne the brunt of our foolishness.

For you, I'm not asking you to forgive us of mistakes. I'm asking you to forgive us of our sins. As we've dug around and looked, there are five things I specifically want to ask for forgiveness of. Let me read 1 Peter 5 before I get into that because here's the charge of God on the elders in regard to how they govern a community of faith.

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

Here are my five specific pleas for forgiveness. First, will you forgive us where our counsel turned into control? There have been a couple of cases where our counsel was not heeded, and we began to act in a way that was controlling. Please forgive us. That is behavior unbefitting to an elder of the church of Jesus Christ. We did not act in accordance with the grace we have been shown by Christ. Please forgive us.

Second, will you forgive us where we've failed to recognize the limits and scope of our authority? See, one of the things we read in 1 Peter 5 is that we are undershepherds of the Great Shepherd. Right? There is one Great Shepherd, and the elders are undershepherds, which means we have no authority but the Bible. We're free to give counsel, but that counsel is not authoritative. The Scriptures alone are authoritative, and there are times we have overreached our authority.

Third, will you forgive us where we allowed our policies and processes to blind us to your pain, confusion, and frustration? There have been several instances where policy and processes drove rather than the soul of the person sitting in front of us. Forgive us. Fourthly, will you forgive us where we acted transactionally rather than tenderly? Again, some of this hooks back up with that process- and policy-driven narrative we kept seeing in several cases.

There may be some of you even maybe in this room who we've dealt with transactionally, not transitionally. You were kind of on a grid of, "Here's what is sinful," or, "Here's the counsel you didn't heed." Please forgive us. I think the one that has caused me the most grief and I think the one we probably did the most hurt... This was the one where some of our covenant members faithfully, lovingly engaged us that started this inquiry. Long before anything that is going on now was going on, this was brought to our attention.

Lastly, will you forgive us where we've failed to recognize you as the victim and didn't empathize deeply with your situation? Now, I want to do all we can to own all we can and more before the Lord. I care not about public relations or how we're perceived in any other way except how the Lord sees us and how we might do what is right before him. I want to own all we can personally and face to face.

As I've walked through these five specific statements of seeking forgiveness from you, if you find yourself, your situation, your story under one of those, will you come in and let us own that? I know that might sound like a terrifying proposition to you. Here's what I would lay before you. Whatever you need to do to feel comfortable, you set the rules.

I can tell you this. Our only motive is to hear and to learn so that might not ever happen again. This isn't an opportunity for us to correct or save face. I'm not trying to save face today. I'm trying to own sin before God. Will you come in? Let us hear where we've failed you. Let us own it personally, directly to you. You can contact one of the lead pastors. You can contact one of the campus pastors. We'll sit down. We'll hear you out.

Again, we don't want to hit balls back and forth. This isn't tennis. We want to learn. We want to hear. We want to own. On top of that, we have already begun to look not only internally but have begun get help externally on how our processes and systems broke down and failed us in this regard. We do not believe we have a doctrinal issue here. We believe we have a practice issue here. We have failed in our practice.

When I end my sermons to us on weekends, I almost always end with, "I love you." I don't do that because I learned that in seminary, because I haven't been to seminary. I do that because the Lord, for whatever reason, has knit my heart with you in this place. I plan on doing nothing else but this until the Lord sits me down. I have felt embarrassed and frustrated and brokenhearted because we have failed you, and we have wounded some of you, and we have not lived up to what God has called us to live up to in his Word.

To be really honest, I don't even know how to close this out. I'm sorry. I don't even know how you should respond. For 20 years, I've been really good at reading a room and feeling and knowing what... I don't know what to say except we have failed. I'm sorry. We're trying to own all we can and more, but I have for 20 years seen the restorative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The only statement we operate off of here is one with a lot of redundancy in it.

It says, "We exist to bring glory to God by making disciples through gospel-centered worship, gospel-centered community, gospel-centered service, and gospel-centered multiplication." When we were in that room and writing that out, some guys who were more on the how you communicate side of things were like, "That's a bit redundant. Why don't we just put, 'gospel-centered,' and then put, 'worship...'" We're going to save on paper. We're going to help the world be greener. That's too much. You don't need it. That's too redundant."

We fought for that redundancy because we wanted this church and us as a people to be defined by the gospel alone, to let it be what undergirds us, let it be what holds us together, let it be what

drives us because it's only in that space that we can confidently say, "He's good. He'll restore. He'll heal." If you're here today, and we've sinned against you, will you let us own it?

If you're a covenant member and our sins haven't been against you, we have failed to fulfill what we've promised you we would fulfill. In time, I pray we might reestablish trust. Maybe you're watching this on the Internet and long punted membership at The Village, but at one point, you were here, and we have sinned against you.

Will you let us know? I promise there are no ulterior motives, no trying to do anything other than hear and learn. It's my earnest desire that in the years to come, the Lord will right our wrongs, make much of his name, and establish himself in this place in such a way where we walk biblically and faithfully both in belief and in practice. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for these men and women. I pray that you might stir our affections for you in this place. I just confess that I'm not sure how to transition into a time of self-reflection and consideration for these men and women. Just know we feel called and compelled to own all we can before you. As we begin to sing and think through restoration and what it means to be restored, God, that you would empower and strengthen our hearts.

For those in this very room, in one of these rooms represented on the campuses who are dialed in right now, will you, Father, strengthen the heart that they would take a step forward, that they would sit down with us face to face, that they would allow us, for the good of their own souls, for the healing of their own souls, an opportunity for us to own our sins against them.

I thank you for the love we have for one another in this place, how you've woven us. I thank you for the stories of victory and life and all the good things that are at play, but we want before you, a holy God, to lay our failures down, our sins down, and ask you to work in that way only you can. Help us. It's for your beautiful name I pray, amen.

Every week, we end our services with the Lord's Supper. If you're a guest with us today, we provide Communion primarily for our covenant members, but if you're a guest who is a believer in Christ in good standing with the church you're visiting us from, I want to invite you to the Table with us to celebrate what Christ has done for us.

I say all the time that this is the moment everything is moving toward when the people of God gather. This is that moment where we're reminded of his grace. We're reminded that he hasn't lost patience. We're reminded that he's for us, not against us. We're reminded that he makes all things new. We're reminded that he enters our mess and heals. I'm going to give you just a moment or two to consider, to search your own heart for what the Lord had for you today. Then I'll be right back up, and we'll take Communion as a family.

The Bible says that on the night Jesus was arrested, he took the bread and broke it and said, "This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." After the meal that night, he took the cup and blessed the cup and said, "This is the blood of the new covenant. Do this in remembrance of me."

Hey, I love you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Thank you, brother. The Lord and time. The Lord and time. Let's worship him.